



Testimony before the Appropriation subcommittee on Human Services
February 27, 2015

H.B. 6824, An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2017, And Making Appropriations Therefor And Other Provisions Related To Revenue

Good evening Senator Flexer, Representative Abercrombie and members of the Appropriations Human Services subcommittee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a statewide anti-hunger organization that focuses on access to the federal food programs. H.B. 6824, An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2017, And Making Appropriations Therefor And Other Provisions Related To Revenue. End Hunger Connecticut! works with DSS and we are very concerned how these cuts will affect those who are enrolled or are attempting to in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). This budget proposal creates need but takes away the ability for people to get help.

SNAP is a federally funded program. DSS administers the program through intake, and verification of applicant's eligibility. SNAP pays only for nutrition assistance and the benefit is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, the least expensive food plan of the USDA that translates to an average of \$3.02 per day per participant. The benefits and 50% of the funds to administer the program are paid by the USDA. In 2014 there were 242,982 households, or 438,599 participants, receiving SNAP benefits.¹ Last year Connecticut received over \$697,000 in federal funds for SNAP benefits which, due to the multiplier effect² had an economic stimulus to the state of over \$1 billion.

This significant amount of benefit and money coming into the state will be lessened with the passage of this proposed budget. Specifically, the cuts and eliminations of programs will create further need compounded by lack of the Torrington office, the defunding of organizations who are the create access to DSS and make the program work and bring in the matching dollars for SNAP outreach, and leave less funds for those in need at the food pantries. This budget only creates more work for the agency.

Modernization was touted as the way to get everyone on SNAP, and other programs, seamlessly. This has not been the reality. Many people can't get through on the phone to have a simple question answered. A call to DSS means an average wait time of over 60 minutes, of which two-thirds of callers abandon the call after 15 minutes. Often applications are not read correctly, or information isn't inputted into the computer system and people are told they did not qualify for benefits. Rather than give the applicant the benefit from when they first applied DSS tells them to reapply, and they not only clog up the system the lose benefits that they were permitted to have. These are people who need food.

Many people call End Hunger CT! for assistance. We have a call center and partner with many community groups and local social services to help people get SNAP benefits. EHC! has 1 FTE and 2 PTE staffing the call center and in 2014 we were able to prescreen close to 4,000 applicants to verify eligibility, assist over 2,300 people who are newly eligible to apply for SNAP, and help with an additional

¹ <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

² Every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates as much as \$9 of economic activity;
http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/134245/err103_reportsummary_1_.pdf

2,100 applications for people who may have lost benefits from errors by DSS, which creates churning, or reapplications for those who were incorrectly taken off the program.

Our Call Center Associates assist anyone who calls in to apply through the web for those who need assistance. This includes many older adults, those who do not have access to a computer and those who don't understand the new processes. EHC! prescreens them for eligibility and if they are we set them up with MyAccount and walk them through the process so they can navigate it themselves. . As one of our Call Center Associates said "With MyAccounts, we find most people have no idea that a) they exist and b) the functions they can help with. DSS really falls short on informing clients in these areas." Callers scan or mail us the documents needed for the application and we scan them in once they are received (this is where our local community partners help). We act as a liaison to community groups, and work with many towns Social Service agencies for their clients.

Our work has been lauded for its accuracy and giving DSS the correct information for SNAP applications decreasing making. The proposed budget cut all the community groups who help with SNAP applications out of the process, a trend we've seen at DSS over the last several years. It is only to the detriment of those who desperately need help.

A year ago last December, the Commissioner volunteered to a staff member of EHC! that the department would have an escalation unit for use by community groups. Lately when we try to get answers to questions about client's benefits we are told not to call the department but to go to a third party which requires us to jump through so many hoops that it is impossible to get an answer, and in fact recreates the initial problem in the first place, inability to reach DSS. People come to us because they cannot get through to DSS and they have lost much needed benefits unnecessarily.

This budget calls for the elimination of the Human Services Infrastructure Community Action Program which works with individuals to receive SNAP as well as other needed benefits. The state also benefits from a dollar for dollar match for SNAP outreach from the USDA using the General Funds allocated to HSI of \$1.28 million. That grant funding currently goes to the CT Association of Community Health Centers. Loss of this federal grant will create unemployment and the closure of another avenue to access to DSS.

Finally, the proposal to cut Connecticut Nutrition Assistance by 10% each year of the budget will be a hardship for those in the state that rely on the food pantries for quality food. The C-NAP pays for high nutritional value food such as proteins and produce for the state's emergency food sites. These funds are provided by the state's two food banks, Foodshare and Connecticut Food Bank to local area providers. These funds are very important as they provide funding for food that may not be donated in large quantities. It is important to note that the food banks cannot charge more than 5 cents per pound for the food (and often much less) and pay the overage for transportation and administration out of their own general funds. It is a partnership between private and public charity. Additionally, I would like to add that this is the majority of funds that the state provides to emergency food providers therefore it is important to keep it in the budget especially when so many are using their services.

We urge the committee to look at the unintended consequence of this proposed budget to the nutritional needs of our neighbors, friends, family and co-workers. This plan creates an already overburdened agency with less partners and more people coming to their door, and includes huge financial losses to the state of SNAP funding.

Thank you.